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# The impasse of Analytical Marxism

Marcus Roberts, *Analytical Marxism: A Critique*, Verso, London and New York, 1996. xv + 268 pp., £45.00 hb., £15.00 pb., 1 85984 855 9 hb., 1 85984 116 3 pb.

Marxism has differed from most other bodies of radical political thought in its conviction that its political radicalism is inseparably connected to a philosophical radicalism – a conviction that underlies the name of this journal. Engels, Kautsky and the orthodox Soviet Marxists all saw Marxism as distinguished from mainstream ('bourgeois') social thought by the dialectical philosophy and method that it inherited from Hegel. Even Althusser, who rejected the Hegel in Marx most vehemently, saw Marxism as having its own distinctive philosophy and method. The 'Analytical Marxist' movement that formed around academics like G.A. Cohen, John Roemer and Jon Elster in the early 1980s differs from previous versions of Marxism on just this point. As Marcus Roberts emphasizes in his survey of their thought, the Analytical Marxists simply gave up the idea that there is any fundamental philosophical or methodological difference between Marxism and mainstream social thought.

Instead, they have recast Marxism as distinctive only in its specific set of theses about the interactions between technology, property, class and state in the course of historical change. Its methodological principles are now just the ones that analytical philosophers of social science have been developing throughout this century: distinguish and define the meanings of terms and propositions clearly; respect the rules of formal logic in argument; explain the workings of wholes by separating them into parts; break theories down into parts that can be stated independently of each other; express those theories in an unambiguous and empirically testable form; and abandon or reconstruct them if they do not stand up to the evidence. The term 'analytical', with its suggestions of analytical philosophy and of the analysis of both social wholes and theories into their parts, summarizes these principles neatly. Beyond them, the Analytical Marxists looked to the concepts and explanatory methods of contemporary mainstream social science, and especially of neoclassi-

cal economics and its offspring, rational choice theory, in order to state their Marxism.

The result is a novel version of Marxism that adheres – at least provisionally – to the basic theses of Marx's social theory, but also adopts a 'bourgeois' set of methodological prescriptions, and indeed uses those prescriptions to attack other versions of Marxism as obscurantist, metaphysical and unscientific, just as Cold Warriors like Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin did earlier in the century. It expresses itself in a language that has almost nothing in common with traditional Marxist discourse. Here, for example, is John Roemer (in *Analytical Marxism*, Cambridge, 1986) on ideology and class struggle:

Perhaps ideology is an institution which cuts transaction costs of various kinds; or perhaps ideology should be conceived as a set of satisficing rules which an agent adopts to limit his own feasible set. Another question is to decide precisely where class struggle should fit into the general equilibrium model: does it determine preferences, or endowments, or is it a bargaining technique in a non-competitive model?

In addition to the concepts and techniques of analytical philosophy and mainstream social science theory, to which they freely helped themselves, the Analytical Marxists could draw on several bodies of earlier Anglophone Marxist work that was informed by some of their aims: for example, Edward Thompson and Christopher Hill's empirically grounded historiography, and Steedman and Morishima's mathematical, neo-Ricardian reconstructions of Marx's economic theory. This helps to explain the quantity and variety of work that the Analytical Marxists were able to produce in the 1980s. In his book Roberts takes us painstakingly across the whole territory, summarizing the main works and debates from Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (1978), Roemer's *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (1982), and Elster's *Making Sense of Marx* (1986) up to the discussions of market socialism and basic-income capitalism of the last few years.

One of the main virtues of Roberts's account is the way in which it shows the extent and depth of the differences between the Analytical Marxists themselves, differences which frustrate any definition of the movement beyond the broad methodological one attempted above. For example, it is often assumed that all Analytical Marxists are methodological individualists, but as Roberts shows there has been a prolonged debate within Analytical Marxism between the more extreme methodological individualists and those who argue that a reference to collective entities and structures is in some degree essential to social explanation. Furthermore, he points out that there has been a tendency for some of the main figures to move away from the first position and towards the second over the last ten years. This is another virtue of the book: that it gives a sense of Analytical Marxism as a movement with some overall 'developmental tendencies'.

The clearest of these tendencies, and the ones on which Roberts puts most emphasis, are a progressive abandonment or weakening of Marx's major social theses, and the shift from an interest in social and historical explanation towards the elaboration of a moral critique of capitalism based on John Rawls's and Ronald Dworkin's egalitarian-liberal theories of distributive justice. Roberts concludes from them that Analytical Marxism as a movement is now over. Most of the main protagonists still meet annually for three days in September, as they have been doing since 1981, and their adherence to an 'analytical' methodology remains as strong as ever. But by now, he argues, there is very little in their shared views that could seriously be called 'Marxist' as opposed

to, say, left-liberal. However, if this is true, then why has Roberts subtitled his book 'a critique', rather than, say, 'a history'? Why is there a need for a critique of a movement which is dead, and what kind of critique is Roberts providing?

Roberts himself seems rather unsure on these questions. His technique is to summarize in detail each of the main positions that the central Analytical Marxists have taken – Cohen's functionalist reconstruction of Marx's theory of history; Elster's attempt to restate Marx's views in the language of methodological individualism; Roemer's recasting of the concept of exploitation in terms of distributive justice; and so on – and then subject it to a series of detailed criticisms. In the earlier chapters the criticisms appear to come from a somewhat Althusserian stance which is never itself defended: against the methodological individualists Roberts repeatedly invokes the idea of the 'systemic logic' of capitalism which imposes 'social predications', and corresponding patterns of behaviour, on individuals. But as the book proceeds this rhetoric seems to dry up, and his criticisms become more eclectic. Sometimes he reproduces arguments from other Marxists who have been attacking Analytical Marxism for the last decade. But often he argues against one Analytical Marxist using points that have been made by another, or at least that are thoroughly in the spirit of Analytical Marxism as a whole. His earlier stance seems to get forgotten as he is drawn more and more into joining the internal debates between the Analytical Marxists. It is in this mode that he makes his most interesting and telling points.



The result is an odd mixture: partly a history of Analytical Marxism, partly a series of criticisms of particular positions in it from outside, and partly an engagement in its own internal debates, thus in a way even a contribution to it. Although in my view the quality of Roberts's expositions (often lucid, occasionally misleading) and criticisms (sometimes insightful, sometimes inadequate, sometimes misconceived) is uneven, and although I suspect that the argument of some sections would be hard to follow for a reader who did not know the original literature, the book certainly constitutes a heroic effort to summarize and engage with the main works of Analytical Marxism in detail. But the question still remains of how this engagement constitutes a 'critique'.

In a preface that was clearly written last, Roberts acknowledges the extent to which he has entered into the discourse of Analytical Marxism, and concludes that his critique is an 'immanent' one. Judging from clues elsewhere, what he means is this: by tracing the arguments that the Analytical Marxists used (or could have used) against each other's positions, the book shows that there was a certain intellectual inevitability to the way in which Analytical Marxism has gradually abandoned Marx's own social theory, in favour of a left version of mainstream political philosophy together with an interest in constructing economic models of society to match its prescriptions. To use Roberts's own words, the book shows that the 'attempt to "reconstruct" Marxism through the application of "analytical" methodologies establish[es] a tension, resolvable only if one term in this equation either disgorges or swallows up the other' (p. 14). It does so by showing how the Analytical Marxists, by remaining true to their analytical methodology, have been gradually forced to give up their Marxism. The book does not refute Analytical Marxism, but retraces, and shows the logic of, the process through which it has already refuted itself. It is a *Phenomenology of Spirit* for Analytical Marxism: Hegel's revenge. The implicit conclusion is that Marxism as a distinct intellectual (and so political) project can only be salvaged if it separates itself from at least large parts of the analytical methodology.

By showing the detailed argumentative links between the successive positions adopted by the main Analytical Marxists, the book does make it plausible to think that there is some intellectual inevitability in the way the movement has developed. It also makes a good case for the view that the upshot of this development has been a set of positions which have little that could be called distinctively 'Marxist' without stretching

the ordinary meanings of words. But if this is the burden of Roberts's argument, then the Analytical Marxists will not be bothered by it. They will see it as entirely to the movement's credit that its overall development has a certain intellectual inevitability, rather than adding up to a series of random zigzags; and they will not be bothered by the claim that this development has led them to a point where it sounds strained to call them 'Marxist' any more. In a recent introductory piece on Analytical Marxism (*Imprints*, no. 3), Cohen points out that what distinguishes a science from a religion is that it develops beyond the theses of its founder. Thus 'physics must contradict (much of) what Galileo and Newton said: only so can it be *loyal* to the tradition which they founded.' Analytical Marxism is to Marx what modern physics is to Galileo or Newton: not the preservation of Marx's views, but the contemporary development of the study that he initiated, which Cohen describes as 'the study of the nature of, and the route to, socialism, using the most advanced resources of social science' (and, he might have added, of normative political philosophy). In fact, he says, a better term for this study from the start would have been Engels's 'scientific socialism', rather than 'Marxism'. His implication is clear: what matters is not the name of this study, but the continuity of its aims with those of its founder, and the coherence and methodological unity of its contemporary version. If it comes to seem odd to call this contemporary version 'Marxism', that is just a sign that the study as a whole is outgrowing its founder, as every progressive intellectual discipline eventually must. On this view, if Roberts's argument is successful, it does not provide a critique of Analytical Marxism, but merely a demonstration of how far it has developed beyond the views of its founder, and thus a proof of its intellectual maturity.

In defining Analytical Marxism by its commitment to socialism, rather than to any specifically Marxian way of conceiving social life, Cohen may be rewriting its history to some degree. Elster's writings, for example, give little sign of such a commitment, and the emphasis of the early Analytical Marxist statements was on Marxism as a set of substantive social theses rather than as a normative position. But his basic point is surely correct. If the aim of socialism (perhaps expanded to include real gender and sexual equality), together with 'advanced' social-scientific and philosophical methods, can provide the movement with a distinctive identity, then whether the name 'Marxism' really fits it does not matter. With or without that name, it can continue to present itself,

as Alan Carling proposed in 1986, as an alternative paradigm within progressive social thought, alongside post-structuralism and critical theory. After all, all three of them are descendants of Marx in one way or another, but advocates of the other two feel no need to call themselves 'Marxists'. It may be true that this paradigm has failed to recruit many followers beyond its original advocates; that its output has slowed drastically since the early burst of works dedicated to analysing Marx's theory and concepts came to an end around 1986; and that it has directly inspired little empirical work since then. But none of this shows that it is 'over', and in fact it continues to generate new work. For example, *Imprints*, the Bristol-based 'journal of analytical socialism' launched in 1996, is squarely within the Analytical Marxist tradition. Analytical Marxism (or Socialism) may be a minority interest among left academics, but it is certainly not dead as an intellectual framework.

In the end, though, this kind of response to Roberts is not sufficient. Cohen must be right to think of Marxism as a progressive study, and therefore one which it is not really appropriate to name after its founder. But there is something thoroughly unsatisfactory about his characterization of that study as 'socialism plus up-to-date social science'. What really set Marx apart from the ethical socialists who preceded him was not that he drew on the best social science of his day, but that he tried to understand human society as essentially a system of labour. This is the source of the deep unity between the central conceptions of his thought: of humans as that species of beings which labour for each other and live from each other's labour; of a social structure as a system of labour that has acquired its own autonomy; of ideology and fetishism as the illusions that result from this autonomy; of property as control and non-control of things within such a system; of class as the corresponding polarization of humans into consumers and producers; of the state as the organization of the dominant class in such a system and state politics as a struggle for power between that class and its rivals; of history as the development of humans' productive abilities through a succession of such autonomous labour-systems; of capitalism as the system of labour in which all property is fully alienable, so that its autonomy can take a tangible shape as the autonomous movement of self-accumulating dead labour; of communism as humankind's collective repossession of its own system of labour; of the class that owns only its own labour power as the necessary agent of this repossession; and finally of his own work as the means by which this class could see the reality

of its situation and so recognize the necessity of this repossession.

If Marx founded a study which was capable of progressing beyond his ideas, then surely the idea of understanding human life as constituted through a system of labour, and engaging with it accordingly, remains essential to that study, as essential as the idea of understanding physical reality through mathematical laws remains to post-Galilean physics. Without that idea it would cease to be the study that Marx founded, just as if physicists gave up understanding reality mathematically and instead started trying to interpret it like a text then they would no longer be practising the science that Galileo founded. It is a basic cognitive and practical orientation of this kind, rather than simply the aim of socialism, which is essential to Marxism; and it is this orientation that Analytical Marxism by now seems to have lost, if it ever had it.

Roberts does not try to say what he thinks Marxism is, but if he has something like this account of it in mind when he argues that Analytical Marxism has ended up ceasing to be Marxist not by accident but by necessity, then his claim is more than a quibble about names. It is the claim that the 'analytical' methodological principles listed above cannot be combined with the basic orientation I have described.

This poses a serious challenge to those of us who think that this orientation is the best one we have for understanding and changing society. Either it has to be shown that Roberts is wrong, and that despite the experience of the Analytical Marxists it is possible to combine the analytical principles with this basic orientation; or else the analytical principles have to be rejected. The only other alternative is to give up the orientation itself.

The challenge is a daunting one. Whichever way it is to be met, it looks as if there is at present no serious way to develop Marxism except through a reconstruction of Marx's essential claims that goes deep enough philosophically to be able to demonstrate that there is something essentially wrong with the way the Analytical Marxists have understood him. In this sense, whether Roberts is right or wrong about the intellectual inevitability of their development, he is right to end by saying that 'the project of developing a successful alternative version of Marxism will demand an engagement with the work of the Analytical Marxists' (p. 222). Despite its flaws, his book should be read by anyone who thinks they can avoid this bleak conclusion.

**Andrew Chitty**